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A Critical Discourse Analysis of Donald Trump's Speech at the Save America Rally

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Abstract

This article provides an analysis of Donald Trump's Save America Rally speech in 2021, employing a critical discourse approach. This research employs Critical Discourse Analysis to examine Trump's "Save America" Rally speech, analyzing language on both the micro and macro levels. Through Critical Discourse Analysis, using Van Dijk's framework, this analysis examines the discourse strategies, society, and cognition of the given speech. The results of this analysis highlight the use of pronouns, synonyms/antonyms, and repetition during Trump's Save America Rally speech. Using pronouns like 'us' and 'them' highlights ideological divides. Synonyms and antonyms are a discourse strategy to create coherence and reinforce the speech. Repetition is constantly used to clarify terms during the Save America speech. By analyzing this topic, the research aims to shed light on the broader implications of the current political discourse, particularly now that Donald Trump has been elected the 45th President of the United States.

Keywords: Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), Donald Trump, political speech, language, ideology.

1. Introduction

Political speeches are a popular strategy to reach the general public, and as such, they are carefully constructed to share thoughts and ideologies aimed at resonating with the audiences interested in particular individuals, parties, and issues. In contemporary American and global politics, Donald Trump's speeches have been controversial and studied from different perspectives to unveil, for instance, his discursive strategies (Saqib Raza & Hassan, 2024), his rhetorical strategies (Atmawijaya, 2024), and his linguistic strategies (Anggraini, Sahnaz, Fathonah, Al Farisi & Fidiyanti, 2018). For this research study, Donald Trump's speech of *Save America* will be analyzed through Critical Discourse Analysis. Due to the complexity and length of this speech, it will be analyzed using Van Dijk's Framework, which aims to link micro-level structures with macro-level social structures.

© **Authors**. Terms and conditions of Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0) apply.
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- Trump employs pronouns such as 'us' and 'them' to create a distinction between social groups.
- Synonyms and antonyms are applied as a discourse strategy to establish coherence within Donald Trump's speech.
- Repetition is used to clarify terms and reinforce a message during the Save America speech by Donald Trump.

1.1 *Donald Trump's speeches in the context of contemporary historical events*

Donald Trump's political speeches cannot be fully understood without considering the contemporary historical events that have shaped his discourse and the constantly changing sociopolitical context of the United States. In 2008, the United States had an economic and social shift due to the financial crisis, which created discontent and distrust in the political institutions. Americans felt disillusioned with the traditional political institutions due to the financial collapse and the high levels of unemployment (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). The public began to distrust the political elites during Obama's presidency. This promoted the Tea Party, which "started to organize just weeks after President Obama's inauguration, framing its mission in terms of such traditional conservative ideas as limited government, low taxes, and resistance to health care reform, its opposition to Obama was far more pernicious" (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018: 130). During the presidency of Barack Obama, Trump promoted the "birther" conspiracy theory by claiming that Obama had not been born in the United States (Frantz, 2020). This conspiracy theory promoted that the presidency could not be held by a person who was not born in the United States. This claim continued and shifted to the reappearance of the slogan *America First* in 2008 with the idea that Obama was not born in America and the country should stay protected from those who were not from the United States (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). Furthermore, Trump used the slogan *America First* and became popular among the people who felt disillusioned with traditional politicians, which were represented by Obama's figure at the time. Building his narrative platform on controversial statements, Trump's speeches particularly addressed the immigration issue and the construction of a border wall between the United States and Mexico. In 2016, Trump demonstrated social media dominance with the use of the social network Twitter as a channel for close communication with his supporters (Ott, 2017). Through Twitter, Trump began to make announcements and use this social network as a political tool. Trump's strategy marked a shift in political communication by posting controversial tweets that elicited strong reactions from the general public (McCaskill, 2017). With a large number of votes, Donald Trump was elected as the 45th President of the United States in 2016 and officially took office in 2017. Trump continued using Twitter as his official channel of communication throughout his administration.

1.2 *The Capitol riot and the Save America speech*

Donald Trump's presidency was shaped by important events such as Black Lives Matter, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the Capitol riot. The speeches pronounced during those events are worth analyzing due to the controversy they generated. The Capitol riot was an attack on the United States Capitol by Donald Trump's supporters attempting to overturn the 2020 presidential election results when Joe Biden was certified as the 46th president (Gessen, 2021). The *Save America* rally speech played an important role in the Capitol riot since they both occurred on the same day. After the speech, Trump's supporters went to the Capitol and planned to oppose the election results. "That afternoon, rioters from Trump's "Stop the Steal" rally interrupted the proceedings by storming the US Capitol, resulting in more than 140 injuries to Capitol police officers and five deaths" (Strawbridge & Lau, 2022: 848). The public's reaction makes the *Save America* speech a key focus for analysis in this research article.

2. Literature review

Trump has made controversial speeches, including the *Save America* rally held in 2021. Understanding this political speech, which will be examined in this article, requires considering previous studies on Trump's speeches. The first section of this literature review examines previous studies of Donald Trump's speeches, which have aimed to uncover the strategies employed during his political addresses. Donald Trump's speeches are explored through the lens of Critical Discourse Analysis, concentrating on the linguistic elements present in these speeches. The second section of this literature review focuses on a description of Critical Discourse Analysis.

2.1 *Previous studies of Donald Trump's speech*

The analysis of Donald Trump's speeches has been subject of study by different scholars in the field of Discourse Analysis. Research looking at Donald Trump's discourse has been taken from the perspective of Critical Discourse Analysis in the study by Yousfi and Mouhadjer (2024). In their study of Donald Trump's inauguration speech in 2017, they explored the linguistic features and discourse strategies of the speech. As a result, Trump's speech was considered a powerful tool to persuade and influence people with the use of language. Other insights of the study reveal how political speeches can shape the way people see the world. For further research, the study suggests the need to employ critical discourse analysis as a means of comprehending how language is employed to guide power dynamics and social change.

Kadim (2022) developed a study of Trump's election campaign speeches, which motivated Native Americans to enter a racial conflict with immigrants. This study adopted Van Dijk's discursive strategies to identify the positive discourse of US (Americans) and the negative discourse of them (immigrants, mainly Muslims). The results of the study highlight that Trump ideologically invested 12 discourse strategies in most of the speeches for political interests. As a conclusion of the study, encourages politicians to stop promoting racism and sectarianism through language use.

Anggraini et al. (2018) carried out research on Donald Trump's speeches during the 45th presidential election using Halliday's Systematic Functional Linguistic Theory. This study utilized Fairclough's framework for CDA, focusing on the stages of analysis: description, interpretation, and explanation. The authors (Anggraini et al., 2018) explore how the transitivity process can be used to reveal ideology, and as a result, Donald Trump applies all the types of transitivity processes (material, mental, relational, behavioral, verbal, and existential) during his speeches. From this study, it can be said that CDA helps uncover strategies that politicians use to construct power and authority, particularly through an analysis of Donald Trump's speech.

2.2 *Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)*

Van Dijk (2015a) defines Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as the way social-power abuse and inequality are enacted and resisted by text and talk in the social political context. Critical discourse analysis investigates ways in which language constructs and is constructed by social relationships, it explores gender, ethnicity, cultural differences, ideology, and identity (Paltridge, 2012). The CDA framework examines the relationship between language and ideology in discourse. This type of discourse analysis provides an analysis of the local and global meaning of a speech where ideologies play an important role. Van Dijk (2013) defines ideologies as socially shared belief systems presupposed in public discourse. CDA is an interdisciplinary approach that examines discourse through power, ideology, and social change, using models like Fairclough's and Van Dijk's socio-cognitive approach (Wodak, 2014). This research will employ Van Dijk's

framework to analyze speech, focusing on its socio-cognitive dimension and the relationship between ideology, language, and power.

3. Methodology

3.1 *Research design*

This research study employs a qualitative research design based on Critical Discourse Analysis to examine Donald Trump's political speech *Save America*. The research questions to analyze this speech are:

1. *What rhetorical strategies and styles were utilized in the speech?*
2. *Are there implicit meanings to the language used that might encourage the supporters to take action?*

Critical Discourse Analysis is appropriate to analyze political discourse since it focuses on language and ideology. Through CDA, Donald Trump's speech is examined to understand the relationship between power and ideology. Furthermore, the analysis will facilitate the recognition of styles utilized and what are the implicit meaning of the language used.

3.2 *Data Collection Materials*

The source for this study is the speech "Save America" rally by Donald Trump, focusing on the speech on 6 January 2021. The sample is a speech of 1 hour 13 minutes and 19 seconds that was given in a political event that took place in Washington D.C. The video of this speech can be found on different websites such as YouTube[1] and the transcript can be found on the webpage Rev.[2] For purposes of this study, the whole speech is being analyzed.

3.3 *Data analysis*

The research completed the data analysis by following the next steps: (1) watching Donald Trump's speech in Washington, D.C., and (2) reading the transcript of the speech. Subsequently, the script was coded and analyzed based on the theory of critical discourse analysis. This theory is focused on a micro-level (vocabulary and grammar), meso-level (context and intertextual references), and a macro-level (ideological). Critical discourse analysis allows the examination of lexical choices, syntactic patterns, pronouns, and thematic organization. Building on this foundation, the researcher analyzed the data based on Van Dijk's framework to interpreted the results of the analysis.

3.4 *Van Dijk's framework*

Critical discourse analysis does not have a unitary framework, and there can be diverse ways to conceptualize CDA. Overall, frameworks on CDA typically focus on features such as power, dominance, hegemony, ideology, and other discourse analytical notions (Van Dijk, 2008). The van Dijk's framework focuses on a social cognitive approach characterized by discourse, cognition, and society triangle (as seen in Figure 1). According to Van Dijk (2015b), all approaches in critical discourse studies recognize the relations between discourse and society. However, Van Dijk's sociocognitive approach focuses on relations as cognitively mediated. In other words, discourse

[1] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ht20eDYmLXU&t=10051s.
[2] https://www.rev.com/transcripts/donald-trump-speech-save-america-rally-transcript-january-6.

structures and social structures are different in nature, and are only related through the mental representations held by language users as individuals and social members. Van Dijk's framework considers political discourse as necessarily a product of individual and collective processes (Chilton, 2004). Building on Van Dijk's sociocognitive approach, this study has examined the language produced in Trump's *Save America* speech.

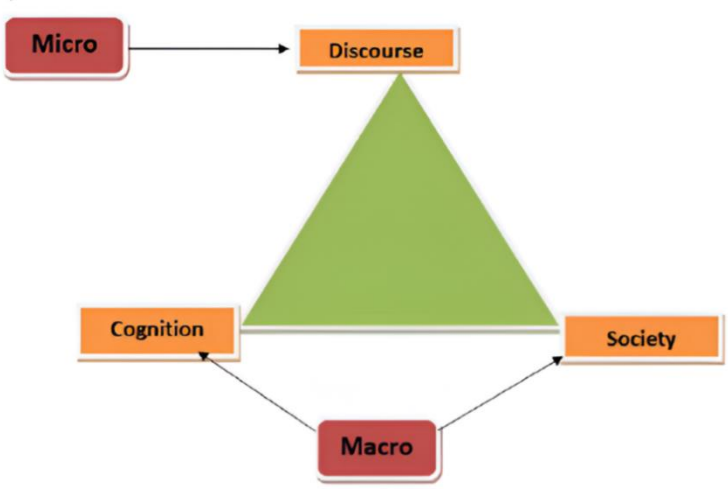

Figure 1. Van Dijk's Framework, considering the micro and macro levels of analysis in Al-Mas'udi & Al-A'mery (2021: 487)

4. Results and discussion

4.1 *Use of pronouns*

Trump's speech covers the use of pronouns such as *us* (referring to his supporters) and the use of them (referring to Democrats). The use of these pronouns reinforces the national worldview that Trump created with the slogan *America First,* which made a distinction between people who were born in America and framing immigrants as outsiders.

> *All of **us** here today do not want to see **our** election victory stolen by emboldened radical left Democrats, which is what they're doing and stolen by the fake news media.*

Trump uses the words "us" and "our" to create a collective identity among his supporters and himself. Based on CDA, Trump constructs a social group relationship with his followers. The pronouns distinguish between who is considered part of this social group, referring to the Republicans.

> *America is blessed with elections all over the world. **They** talk about our elections. You know what the world says about **us** now?*

The pronoun "they" has a persuasive function to refer to Democrats, creating an outgroup, in this case, the opponents. Through this speech, Trump constantly highlights that the opponents are a threat to America and are dangerous people, for this reason, "they" are not part of the same social group. The use of these pronouns embeds an ideology that divides groups of people.

> ***We** want to be so respectful of everybody, including bad people. We're going to have to fight much harder and Mike Pence is going to have to come through for **us**.*

Trump refers to "we" as real Americans, and positioning his supporters to be respectful people and non-native Americans are not part of this group. CDA explores the linguistic choices of pronouns and how these have the power to persuade Trump's followers and the reaction they had during the Capitol riot.

> *Let them rule the right way, but it almost seems that they're all going out of their way to hurt all of* ***us****, and to hurt our country. To hurt* ***our*** *country.*

Donald Trump emphasizes an in-group referring to it as "us, we, our" where which allows his supporters to feel as part of his group. This causes an exclusion of those who are not part of the group. Using words like hurt with the function of victims reinforces that the Democrats are dangerous and powerful enemies that should not be trusted.

> *And* ***they*** *don't realize that that's going to be the end of the Republican party as* ***we*** *know it, but it's never going to be the end of* ***us****, never. Let them get out.*

Here, Trump emphasizes the demise of the Republican Party. During the speech, the use of the pronoun "we" refers to him and his supporters, and this statement marks the beginning of the Democrats' victory. These affirmations during the speech expressed Trump's thoughts about the Democrats' victory. Trump's use of pronouns constructs a powerful speech, contributing to the emotional intensity that guided the Capitol riot. It is important to remember that Donald Trump's supporters attacked the Capitol Building on 6 January 6 2021.

4.2 *Synonyms and antonyms*

While analyzing the speech, another important pattern identified was the use of synonyms and antonyms. This suggests that synonyms are used to create cohesion during a speech, and antonyms are used to contrast their position within the opposition, making the speech more compelling.

> *We will never* ***give up****. We will never* ***concede****, it doesn't happen.*

Trump's use of synonyms is evident to reinforce resistance and determination. Using the words give up and concede allows the support of key words and the audience remain focus on these central themes. Synonyms are used to construct resistance and in this case it blends from an informal word such as give up to a more formal words like concede. The use of these synonyms affirms that they should not give up and accept the election results. Donald Trump continues with the use of synonyms to make powerful statements as given in the example below.

> *No, we have a corrupt media. They've* ***gone silent****. They've* ***gone dead****.*

The use of synonyms and repetition both express resistance and action. Trump mentions the system is a fraud and media is corrupted since they do not state the truth about the elections. Trump deepens distrust of the media and democratic institutions by implying the media has not mentioned anything about the fraud done during the elections. This promoted Trump's supporters to distrust what the media shares since he states they are corrupts and do not share information about the fraud done in the elections.

> *We have a* ***deep*** *and* ***enduring love for America*** *in our hearts.* ***We love our country****. We have overwhelming pride in this great country, and we have it deep in our souls.*

The use of the synonyms deep and enduring shows the positive feelings that Republicans have for the United States, again making a distinction that only the people who are part of this social group feel love for America. The use of these synonyms strengthens the position of love that his supporters have for the country.

Trump also uses some antonyms during his speech. If the antonyms are used negatively, these might cause fear or urgency (Alamillo et al., 2023). Some antonyms that Trump used during his speech Save America, are listed below.

> ***You're the people*** *that built this nation.* ***You're not the people*** *that tore down our nation.*

Trump uses antonyms building on the *us* versus *them* construct, highlighting that his supporters are people who build the nation. On the other hand, the democrats and protestors can be considered as destructive people. This statement reinforces that his supporters are the people who build the nations, not like the immigrants who are dangerous to the nation.

> *We're probably not going to be cheering so much for some of them because you'll never take back our country with* ***weakness****. You have to show* ***strength****, and you have to be* ***strong****.*

Using these antonyms positions Trump's supporters in a positive position and with power by emphasizing the word *strength*. Using the word "strong" generates power, which implies that supporters must be strong, ultimately validating the idea that opponents weaken the country.

4.3 *Repetition*

Politicians often use reiteration during a political speech to clarify a term. "Reiteration is a form of lexical cohesion which involves repetition of a lexical item, at one end of the scale; the use of a general word to refer back to a lexical item, at the other end of the scale" (Halliday & Hasan, 1976: 278). In this section, various fragments of Donald Trump's speech will be analyzed, considering how repetition is used during his political speech.

> *There's never been anything like this. We will not let them silence your voices. We're* ***not going to let it happen. Not going to let it happen****.*

Donald Trump used repeated phrases during his speech, and most of them were used to emphasize that their voice should be heard. This specific phrase was used to create awareness among his supporters not to accept the election's results. Leading to the next quotes, where the supporters were encouraged to fight.

> *And we* ***fight****. We* ***fight*** *like Hell, and if you don't* ***fight*** *like Hell, you're not going to have a country anymore.*

The word fight was repeated various times during the Save America speech. These statements may be related to the events that occurred at the Capitol riot, where supporters of Donald Trump attacked the United States Capitol. This statement is emotionally charged, with an implicit message that if the Republicans do not fight, they will lose their nation. This statement serves as a call to action to Trump's supporters, who, on the same day of the speech, rioters disrupted the proceedings by storming the US Capitol, causing injuries to Capitol police officers and five deaths.

> *These are the facts that you won't hear from the fake news media. It's all part of the suppression effort.* ***They don't want to talk about it. They don't want to talk about it.***

In these statements, Donald Trump refers to the news media. On several occasions during the speech, he highlights that the media will not share the reality of what was going on during the elections. These words suggest that supporters distrust what the media shares. Repetition is strategically used to reinforce Trump's message of distrust and emphasize his ideology, placing it in the audience's thoughts since they listen to the same statements more than once

> *We beat them four years ago. We surprised them. We took them by surprise and this year, they* ***rigged*** *an election. They* ***rigged*** *it like they've never* ***rigged*** *an election before.*

Donald Trump repeated the word *rigged* various times during the speech. This word was used to indicate that the election was managed fraudulently. As shown above, the repetition of this word was used to highlight that fraud was committed during the election. Donald Trump's speech empowers resistance to the election results, and this is related to the actions carried out at the Capitol Riot.

5. Conclusion

Critical discourse analysis plays an important role when analyzing political speeches. In this study, Donald Trump's Save America speech was analyzed through Van Dijk's framework. The main outcomes of this analysis were the patterns related to the use of nouns, synonyms, and antonyms, as well as repetition during his speech. Donald Trump used these lexical units to empower his ideology regarding the election. The use of certain words may have provided assumptions among the supporters. It would be interesting to do further research on the speech that is currently being used now that he has been elected as the 47th president of the United States.

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